

CANCER TREATMENT

Cognitive Health After Treatment

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Cognitive problems (“chemobrain”) following cancer diagnosis and treatment can affect a person’s ability to think, remember, concentrate, learn new things, or process information quickly. Some people describe the mental foggy as “not being as sharp as I used to be.” These problems can affect all parts of a person’s life – particularly their work lives. The more research we do, the more we understand that cognitive problems are as “real” as any other cancer side effect and should be addressed.

What causes this problem and when will it go away?

Researchers are still trying to understand what causes the cognitive problems and exactly what parts of the brain are affected, but we have figured out it isn’t just due to chemotherapy. Some changes may happen prior to any treatment, suggesting a genetic predisposition, inflammation, or oxidative damage. Hormonal therapies, surgery, radiation, and immunotherapies can also contribute to the problem. The stress of knowing you have cancer, combined with the insomnia, fatigue, depression, and anxiety that many survivors experience can all impair cognitive abilities – as can the natural aging process.

Most research has been done with breast cancer patients, and up to 78% of them may experience cognitive problems during active treatment. Many survivors do report that their cognitive functioning does get better within 6-12 months after their active treatment ends, but for others the effects persist longer and could actually get worse over time.

How is the brain affected?

- **Attention:** Difficulty staying on task, particularly when there are distractions
- **Memory:** Forgetting appointments, how to perform a task, or word finding
- **Processing Speed:** Reaction time is slowed or thinking seems inefficient
- **Executive Functioning:** Struggling with organization, prioritization, or multi-tasking

These are the most common problems that survivors experience, although other concerns have been reported.

What can be done to improve cognitive abilities?

Unfortunately, we haven’t found a medical treatment to reverse these changes and that can quickly restore cognitive function. However, there are many things people can do to build their cognitive abilities and improve their cognitive health.

“Work-Around” Strategies

- **Minimize distractions:** Turn off e-mail reminders or ringers; close the door to your work-space; tell people not to disturb you when working.
- **Use external aids** to help you remember or to organize tasks.
- **Break down tasks** into smaller, more manageable steps and sequence them so you don't get so overwhelmed; avoid multi-tasking.
- **Repeat key points** (or numbers) when you are talking to people to make sure you understand what they are saying to you.
- **Build in more time** to complete tasks. You will get there; it just may take longer.
- **Habits are our friends;** tasks we do the same way on a regular basis require less concentration, as does organizing your space so that things are always in the same place.

Living Healthy

- **Physical exercise** is as good for your brain as it is for the rest of your body.
- **Find ways to manage stress**, such as relaxing activities you enjoy — yoga, meditation, or prayer.
- **Get help with insomnia**, pain, depression, or anxiety because these problems can impair cognitive functioning.
- **Exercise your brain** just like you exercise the rest of your body. Find something that challenges your brain and that you enjoy, such as playing music or learning a new language, or using a brain training program.

No one strategy works for everyone, so try some of these suggestions and figure out what works best for you. Cancer is a condition covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act, so consider contacting your HR department about what accommodations might help you continue working. If your cognitive problems are severely affecting your life, ask for a referral to a neuropsychologist or occupational therapist who may be able to help you pinpoint your problem and offer additional strategies to consider.

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